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Nandi Moonflower   April 17, 2012

Paradise Ablaze:

Cavendish's Feminist Utopias and the Deconstruction of Gender Hierarchy

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Abstract

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This study sets out to explore how early modern author Margaret Cavendish used her writings to offer a bold feminist statement that reconfigured seventeenth-century notions of gender. I base my argument on three primary texts: *Bell in Campo* (1662), *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), and *The Description of a New World called the Blazing New World* (1666). I argue that Cavendish uses "gender blending" to fashion a feminist statement that deconstructs her era's gender binary and its associated gendered hierarchy. Through this deconstruction, she uses her works as gender transgressive spaces that enable women to enter the public sphere.

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Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

Primary Texts by Margaret Cavendish:

The Description of a New World called the Blazing New World   *Blazing*

The Convent of Pleasure   *Convent*

Bell in Campo   *Bell*

Observations upon Experimental Philosophy   *Observations*

Secondary Texts by Jonathan Goldberg:

The Seeds of Things   *Seeds*

Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance   *Matter*

Introduction

Often "dressed in a vest" or another piece of men's attire, and, at times, refusing to

curtsey in favor of adopting less womanly bows, Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Duchess of

Newcastle (1623-1673), attracted plenty of attention with her unique, nearly theatrical display of

female masculinity (Sir Charles Lyttelton qtd. in Battigelli 5).[1] Samuel Pepys's diary even

includes an entry documenting "100 boys and girls running" to catch a glimpse of the curiously

clad Duchess (qtd. in Battigelli 5). In addition to inspiring humorous scenes, her dramatic

appearance also attracted criticism. While Pepys dismissed Cavendish's garb as overly "antic,"

her incorporation of male attire warrants discussion as it reveals a tendency that influenced far

more than her fashion choices (qtd. in Quinsee 92). Seventeenth-century England saw an

increasingly evident cultural division between men's public sphere and the private sphere

designated to women, but Cavendish rebelled against such stratification (Mascetti 2).[2] Cavendish

continually entered the public realm via prolific publication and left a staggering corpus of more

than a dozen distinct volumes.[3] Working within everything from the male-dominated genre of

philosophical treatises to utopian tales, Cavendish's genre choices reveal yet another instance of

public gender transgression.[4] Cavendish's singularity did not go unnoticed. Her contemporaries

even labeled her "Mad Madge" (Perry 265). Despite her intriguing eccentricity and many

writings, today Cavendish remains largely unknown.

Though the past few decades have seen a burgeoning of scholarship on Cavendish's texts,

she, like countless other seventeenth-century Englishwomen authors, remains largely restricted

to graduate-level study. Within undergraduate curricula, such women rarely receive mention.

This lack of representation continues to deny women like Cavendish of the agency they used their texts to obtain. Due to her emphasis on marriage, politics, and other aspects of the public/private division that greatly shaped women's lives, Cavendish's texts offer valuable insights into the development of feminist thought, women's own constructions of identity, English women's literature, and of women's history more broadly. As such, her works demand increased visibility within academic study. Toward such an end, this paper examines how Cavendish imbued her writings, like her own self-presentation, with a compelling blend of traditionally masculine and feminine attributes to create multifaceted instances of gender blending that deconstruct her society's gender binary and, by extension, its gendered hierarchy.

Her complex depictions of gender remain distinct from androgyny, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as hermaphroditism on the biological level of sex (OED). Rather than obscuring sexual differences, Cavendish maintains biological distinctions between males and females. For example, she reminds readers of characters' physical bodies and differentiates between the sexes by using the term "heroickesses" for heroines and "heroick" for her (few) heroes — even when women cross-dress and join men on the battlefront (*Bell*).[5] The women's physical strength remains linked to their female bodies rather than solely connected to the masculine form. Thus, Cavendish disrupts gender expectations or the behavioral and performative traits associated with masculinity and femininity (Butler 179).[6] Nowhere does Cavendish's multifaceted presentation of gender more thoroughly reconfigure and challenge early modern gender expectations than in her works featuring female-run utopias. Therefore, this paper will focus on Cavendish's *Bell in Campo*, *The Convent of Pleasure*, and *The Description of a New World called the Blazing New World* where she creates such women-only spaces.

In light of her works' rather marginalized position within the academy, the following brief summaries provide context for the themes explored in this paper. Cavendish's *Bell in Campo* follows Lady Victoria as she joins her husband on the battlefield. Disproving male character's speculation about her sex's weakness, she raises a female army whose valor the king rewards by creating new laws that situate women, rather than men, as head of their households. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the young, virtuous Lady Happy founds a convent in order to enjoy her "freedom" without the "crosses and sorrows" associated with "a Marry'd life" (218). Allowing for "Women-Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries," the convent also offers women increased liberty since they can take on professions that would normally be restricted to men during Cavendish's era (223). Later a cross-dressing prince enters the tale, illustrating that Cavendish portrays male characters in a gender transgressive manner as well. Opening with her improbable escape from abduction, the protagonist of *The Blazing New World* quickly enters the new land and marries its Emperor. She accesses traditionally masculine forms of power, taking on the role of absolute monarch and heading the church. Later traveling as a disembodied spirit, the Empress latches on to another form of traditionally masculine power when she saves her hometown through victorious military leadership. Tying herself to the then male realm of philosophical thought, the Empress reveals her own philosophical opinions to her subjects as well as to her scribe, "the Duchess of Newcastle." While the first two pieces described are plays, rather than strictly utopian treatises, all three works concern themselves with depicting a perfectly ordered society and the regulations responsible for it, which I situate within the generic context of utopian texts.

Thomas More coined the word *utopia* in his 1516 text of the same name, playing with the Greek *ouk* (not) and *topos* (place). Simultaneously denoting a nonexistent place (a "no place")

that More's idyllic description asks readers to confuse with its homophone, "Eutopia (the good place)," the term itself contains an irreparable tension (Vieira 4). While constructions of utopias have changed dramatically since More's publication, the depiction of a traveler encountering a superior example of social organization continually appears in later works within the genre (Vieira 6-8). [7] Cavendish's texts are no exception. In focusing on a better life, utopian works (as well as their Golden Age predecessors) inherently contain an element of social critique that borders on satire.[8] Robert Elliot posits a connection between satire and utopia in his description of the ancient Saturnalia celebration's tradition of role reversals and mockery of social order. Since the festivities provided a break from society's hierarchies and commemorated a mythic time of immortality and social equality referred to as the Golden Age, Elliot affirms that the Saturnalia significantly influenced the development of utopia as a concept. Given its roots in travel narratives (authored by males) as well as its engagement with the public sphere (seen in the concern with delineating the perfect style of government), utopia as a genre appears unequivocally male.[9] As a woman writing in a male-dominated generic tradition, Cavendish's creation of utopian works marks a disruption in gender divisions. Cavendish purposely exacerbates this transgression by using the masculine genre of utopia to write about female-run worlds where men take peripheral positions.

By inverting the gender dynamics of her society's patriarchal power structure, Cavendish capitalizes on the potential for social commentary and disruption of social hierarchies that the genre of utopia enables.[10] Interestingly, as Marina Leslie notes, Cavendish's use of utopian spaces as realms offering greater female power seems to follow models found in earlier male-authored works.[11] Citing Plato's *Republic* as well as a few of Aristophanes's works, Leslie places Cavendish's female-run utopian worlds within a tradition of tales with women leaders (9).

Frequently using the female body to create moments of humor at women's expense, these male authors, Leslie notes, belittle any potential serious challenge to gender hierarchies by poking fun at the instances of inversion they offer (9).[12] Viewing Cavendish's utopian endeavors as having proto-feminist aims, Leslie believes Cavendish safeguards her female spaces against similar mockery by removing female physicality from her tales. At first glance, Leslie's conclusion appears extremely well-supported by the Empress's military action during her travel as a disembodied soul and the warrior women's armor in *Bell in Campo* that seemingly erases any evidence of their feminine form.

Leslie's argument appears even more convincing in light of a vast array of seventeenth-century discourses connecting women to the inferior, material, and bodily aspects of life while ascribing all things superior, immaterial, rational, and of the mind to men (Bazeley, sect. 2; Butler 12; Spelman).[13] For example, theological accounts stressed women's origin in the material (Eve came from Adam's *body*) as well as her inferiority to men since God made Eve *for* Adam (Wiesner 15; Aughterson 134). Physiological works framed women as physically frail and promoted humoral theory, which portrayed females as deformed men whose lack of perfection (internal heat) prevented them from pushing their penises outside the body.[14] Childbirth also linked women to matter. Females' inability to impregnate themselves inspired beliefs that their bodies only produced matter while men's seed gave life (Aughterson 42; Lacqueur 58-59). Likening the conception of a child to the conception of an immaterial idea, women's inability to self-impregnate turned into a metaphor for the weakness of their minds (Laqueur 68-69). Thus, depictions of women focused on their sex's connection to bodily existence, which both tied them to materiality and inherently bound them to positions of inferiority. Even so, the ultimate removal of feminine physicality in *The Blazing World* could prove problematic from a feminist

perspective for reasons I will examine later. Though Leslie's close reading offers insights into

Cavendish's manipulation of utopia as a genre, it ignores one important fact—Cavendish

remains continually concerned with materiality as she fills her texts with frequent depictions of

bodies, especially those of females.

      Cavendish's texts continually challenge any and all limits on the exposure of women's

bodies and accentuate male desire to gaze upon (and to access) these feminine figures. Thus,

women's physical existence remains in the forefront throughout her tales, despite any bodiless

transit the previously mentioned Empress undertakes. If incorporeality provides Cavendish's

characters with power, why does she stress materiality? I believe the answer to this question lies

in Cavendish's own materialist ideas, which underpin the representations of gender and sexual

difference found within her fictional works. In fact, Cavendish herself explicitly linked her

utopian texts to her philosophical opinions by publishing *The Blazing World* as a companion

piece to her treatise *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*.[15]

      For Cavendish, immateriality cannot exist because everything in nature "is purely

corporeal or material" (*Observations* 138).[16] Cavendish also frames the mind and its workings as

material since "thought is a rational touch, as touch is a sensitive thought," (*Observations* qtd. in

Seeds 148).[17] She challenges one aspect of gender hierarchy by simply claiming that only the

material exists because such a belief disrupts any mind/body or material/immaterial binaries that

depict women as inferior to men. According to Cavendish, matter also has "infinite compositions

and divisions" (*Observations* 137). Every level of matter then consists of a mixture of "self-

motion," "inanimate parts" and "sensitive and rational parts" (*Observations* 144; 145).

Comprised of reason and sense as well as a seemingly paradoxical union of both inanimate and

moving parts, Cavendish's matter intrinsically diminishes many distinctions that could create

binaries. For her, opposing forces exist as part of the same thing—matter itself. At the same time, matter's "infinite compositions" allow for essential difference due to variations in bonding.

Her conception of nature as a "servant of God" also warrants discussion as it carries serious implications for her portrayal of difference (*Observations* 23). Labeling nature a "wise and provident lady," Cavendish genders this divine "servant" female (*Observations* 107). However, Cavendish does not reproduce female subservience to a male power (God) since she refuses to describe God in gendered terms. As an entity working for God, nature's material variation –attributed to matter's mixed composition and its numerous ways of combining– appears sanctioned by The Almighty. Therefore, *differences* between bodies (including men's and women's) do not mark flaws. Differences instead come from nature and enjoy God's approval or mandate. Cavendish's thought then brings gender hierarchy into question by illustrating that bodily difference does not make women inferior to men.

In his book, *The Seeds of Things*, Goldberg brilliantly links Cavendish's philosophy to her fictional work. He identifies Cavendish's affirmation of everything's materiality and the inescapable union of opposites in her conception of matter as instilling an interplay of "sameness and difference" in her fictional writings. Goldberg argues that an underlying "unintelligibility" permeates her work, just as opposing forces cannot be separated from one another within her conception of matter. In Cavendish's work, Goldberg concludes, unreadability results in an inability to clearly distinguish others from one's self (*Seeds* 145). Whereas Goldberg primarily focuses on the material components of Cavendish's writing (her sentence length and the form of her handwriting, for example), I argue that the "sameness and difference" he identifies significantly impact her presentation of gender. Specifically, these two opposing forces manifest in her use of gender blending where gender boundaries blur and sexual difference, as previously

mentioned, remains intact. Cavendish's pairing of biological difference with gender obscuration informs her characterization of males and females.

Representing what Anna Battigelli labels the "active cavalier," Cavendish's strong female protagonists take up the role of monarch as well as other traditionally masculine positions and forms of power (27). Secondary female characters follow their example, dispersing the strength ascribed to the protagonists down to all women. *Bell in Campo* offers the clearest example when the principal character, Lady Victoria, convinces an entire army of women to join her in battle. Cavendish does not enable female characters' masculine display to preclude their existence as women since she both stresses their physical bodies and uses feminized versions of their titles. Men also partake in gender transgression, as a cross-dressing prince in *Convent of Pleasure* demonstrates. With the prince, Cavendish maintains her emphasis on biological sex since he enters the convent in order to take the institution's leader, Lady Happy, as his wife. Other male characters remain similarly preoccupied with gaining sexual access to women. Therefore, while divisions between masculine and feminine appear less than clear, men and women's biological sex marks a fundamental difference between them. Thus, the "sameness and difference" Goldberg identifies in her philosophy also influences her textual treatment of gender. In fact, Cavendish's conception of difference might radically rethink her era's commonly held notions about the body. Since Cavendish allows variations in mixtures of matter to account for difference, her views might give women an ontological existence since females would appear essentially different from males. This possible implication threatens patriarchal order by offering a radical divergence from the previously mentioned ideas that described women as flawed men rather than members of a biologically distinct category.[18]

Thomas Laqueur affirms that women did not exist in the Renaissance, at least not

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ontologically. Prior to the Enlightenment, according to Laqueur, gender rather than biological sex remained viewed as the "*real*" distinction between men and women (8, original emphasis). Without a fundamental biological distinction between men and women, sex existed on an odd continuum. Illustrating the perceived fluidity of sexual difference at the time, the Renaissance saw many accounts of women transforming into men after adopting masculine behavior. Such stories emphasized the importance of behaving appropriately according to one's gender (Laqueur 58; Halberstam 60).[19] Even women who did not undergo such a metamorphosis posed a potential threat to gender distinctions. Early-modern texts framed the tribade as a woman whose clitoris could undergo abnormal swelling, making her able to penetrate other women (Halberstam 59-61; Laqueur 137; Traub 17).[20] While Cavendish maintains sexual distinctions, the many instances of lesbian erotic tension within her work certainly speak to these early modern fears about female sexuality. However, Cavendish places gender issues, rather than strictly questions of female sexuality, at the heart of her utopian works.

Rather than accepting the gender hierarchy that privileged males, Cavendish places the spotlight on women's few options within this order as well as their attempt to escape its gender-biased stratification.[21] Her characters, such as Lady Happy, ask "what is there in the publick World that would allow me to live in it?" finding only a society that defines them by their relationships to men and urges them to marry (*Convent* 218). With men designated as head of household, women in Cavendish's era found themselves defined by and compelled to form relationships in which they would always be inferior (Wiesner 27). In fashioning their escape, all the protagonists in the tales I will explore create separate worlds for themselves where their sex's power extends into the public realm. Cavendish stages her attack on gender hierarchy by destabilizing gender boundaries in her depictions of feminine men, masculine women, and the

power relations that play out between the two in her utopian worlds. She engages with a wide array of seventeenth-century discourse that framed women as inferior. Then she inverts the gendered aspect of these discourses to underscore their artificial nature, ultimately illustrating that they represent social constructions rather than natural truths.

Although Cavendish portrays these female-run spaces as utopian and far better than the male-dominated world, contributors to scholarship on her work express reservations about describing her or her writings as feminist. Leslie, for example, sees Cavendish's emphasis on imagined spaces as lacking a clear engagement with feminist issues (18-21). On a similar note, Mascetti argues Cavendish does not fit into a strictly feminist framework because her writings do not reject patriarchal order so much as develop a space for a feminine voice within it (13; 2-3). While these arguments have their merits, they expose problems that complicate use of the term "feminist" with regard to early modern women's work. While the definition of "feminism" is widely contested, this study uses the term to encompass a wide range of views and projects concerned with advancing women's interests by promoting greater equality between the sexes and improving women's political, social, and economic standing, as well as other efforts dedicated to voicing women's unique hardships and issues. Cavendish's texts certainly fit such a definition. Her works both stress female political involvement and continually emphasize societal hindrances to female agency to depict women as fully capable of achieving and deserving of the rights that men enjoy. Furthermore, reserving the term feminism for blatant rejections of patriarchy excludes important works arguing for greater equality between the sexes produced by women centuries before major women's rights movements began. These early texts require sensitivity to the pervasiveness of patriarchal order during past eras in order to appreciate the feminist statements they contain. Readers of these works must consider how women could

articulate alternative conceptions of gender in an overwhelmingly patriarchal culture that all but silenced them. How could women make a space for a female voice and an unique female existence when even their physical bodies were viewed as failed attempts at the masculine form? How could they access power restricted to males while maintaining a uniquely feminine identity? Cavendish offers insights into such questions.

I argue that, in fashioning her feminist critique of her era's gender hierarchy, Cavendish uses her fictive worlds as gender transgressive spaces that praise women's unique bodies and imaginative power in order to enable women to enter the public sphere. The first chapter examines Cavendish's masculine depiction of female characters and her use of the material/immaterial binary to destabilize male privilege. In the second chapter, I explore Cavendish's use of gender blending to destabilize theological depictions of women's inferiority. I argue in the third chapter that Cavendish's feminist statement gains visibility through the power shifts within and fates of her female-run spaces. The degree to which Cavendish stabilizes women's power and, by extension, the utopian space under their control, appears very much based on how far they thrust themselves into the public sphere. In the fourth chapter, I explore how Cavendish uses the imagination and its products to enable women to enter the public realm. Focusing on the "sameness and difference" inherent in gender blending of both female and male characters, this project seeks to make Cavendish's feminist statements legible to all.

Introduction Notes:

1. In her biography on the Duchess, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, Anna Battigelli similarly examines Cavendish's attire as well as behavior (5) and, like Sophie Tomlinson (Tomlinson 158-159), underscores the Duchess's unique display of both male and female attributes. Susannah Quinsee agrees that Cavendish crosses gender boundaries, transforming into "a hybrid being who is both masculine and feminine in characteristic" (91). Following the example Judith Halberstam creates in her book *Female Masculinity*, I am using the term to describe female possession of traits typically considered male. While Cavendish's date of birth remains debatable, most scholars agree on the year 1623 (Battigelli 117).

2. Yaakov Mascetti explains that in the 1600s "cultural prescriptions assigned an increasingly confined space to women" as gendered division between the public and private spheres solidified (2).

3. Eileen O'Neill's introduction to Cavendish's *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* lists all of Cavendish's publications and mentions that several revisions and republications increase her oeuvre to an impressive twenty-one (viii-ix;xi). While other women too published, James Fitzmaurice characterizes her era as one that "tolerated women writing but was deeply suspicious of women publishing" (qtd in Mihoko Suzuki 55)

4. Editor Susan James (*Blazing World*) highlights that Cavendish "us[ed] genres considered unsuitable for women," such as the philosophical treatise (*Sociable Letters* qtd. in James xvii). Therefore, Cavendish's genre choices too mark another form of gender transgression.

5. Editor Alexandra G. Bennett gives the meaning of these two words, retaining Cavendish's usage "because of the emphasis the feminized term places on the extraordinary physical achievements of the women" (31).

6. Theorist Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, highlights divisions between the performative and behavioral aspects of gender and the actual physical body by emphasizing that "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (179).

7. Fatima Vieira explains the features that make a work recognizably utopian as well as what features of More's piece continue to appear in writings within the genre.

8. Scholars trace people's longing for a perfect social order back to the ancient Greek and Roman concept of the Golden Age—a mythic period where the deity Saturn (or his Greek name, Cronus) reined over an egalitarian world where men interacted directly with the gods—and the Saturnalia celebrations honoring it (Elliot 8; 10; Vieira 5-6).

9. Vieira points out that "More used the conventions of travel literature" when creating the genre of utopia (7).

10. Marina Leslie offers an in-depth study on Cavendish's use of the utopian genre to allocate greater power to women while stripping men of the privileged position enjoyed by their sex in early-modern England.

11. Alessa Johns's "Feminism and Utopianism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010) additionally notes the existence of a female-authored tradition of (allegorical) spaces offering greater female agency without the belittlement of female power in Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). Horacio Sierra sees Cavendish's *Convent of Pleasure* as materializing Pisan's allegorical city (652).

12. Specifically, Leslie points out that "sexual inversions of power drive much of Aristophanes's bawdy comedy" and Plato also "indulge[s] a stifled giggle in the Republic when Socrates, Glaucon and company are forced to imagine women (naked women, perhaps naked old women) in the gymnasium with the men" (9). In these works, women's bodies become the site for mockery that ultimately hinders any representation of their sex's authority.

13. Butler points out that the heritage of mind/body dualism has a gender hierarchy built into it. For more information about the gendered implications of the material/immaterial binary also visible in mind/body dualism, see Deborah T Bazeley *An Early Challenge to the Precepts and Practice of Modern Science: The Fusion of Fact, Fiction, and Feminism in the Works of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*. Additionally, Elizabeth V. Spelman's "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views" provides a historic overview of these gendered components.

14. Laqueur stresses the fact that women's bodies were seen as deformed versions of male ones rather than entities belonging to a separate sex. See also Aughterson (41-66).

15. Leslie sees Cavendish's choice to publish *The Blazing World* with her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* as an act that further participates in the utopian genre since it seemingly "imitates Bacon," who published *New Atlantis* along with his *Sylva Sylvarum* (9).

16. Cavendish describes anything that could possibly exist beyond the corporeal as outside of creation, thus, restricted to God alone (*Observations* 38).

17. Goldberg emphasizes Cavendish's material view of the mind as well. In *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance*, Goldberg explains that the physical existence of written letters represented, for some early modern thinkers, a material display of the mind's contents. The mind appears not as "a locus of invisibility and internality," but as a material thing that can be "made visible" (*Matter* 188). However, as Descartes exemplifies, other prominent early modern thinkers consider the mind an immaterial entity (Fisher; Cunning; Butler 12). These beliefs further framed men as superior creatures because of women's ties to the body and men's to the mind. See Spelman for more information about the immaterial mind and its gendered implications.

18. Laqueur specifically addresses women's lack of ontological distinction from men in early modern texts (8).

19. Judith Halberstam notes that the relatively high number of female-to-male stories, as compared with male-to-female transformation tales, echoes commonly held notions that depicted the male as the telos of creation. Nature would presumably move towards perfection by replicating the male form (Halberstam 60).

20. Valerie Traub points out that the tribade has roots in Greek literature, but argues that the "rediscovery of the clitoris" in the early-modern period inspired a reemergence of these beliefs about women's potential subversion of their 'appropriate' sexual role (17). Halberstam affirms that the tribade somewhat challenges the one-sex model because she represents an intersexed figure that society viewed as female while simultaneously claiming that she possessed an organ that allowed her to act (sexually) male (60-61).

21. Horacio Sierra views Cavendish's choice to center her works on women's issues as "foreshadowing Virginia Woolf's call for the literary world's respect for women's writing that focuses on the domestic and the microcosms that affect life more profoundly than larger, epic-length political narratives" (653). In focusing on women's subjugation within patriarchal order, Erin Lang Bonin believes Cavendish highlights "that culturally dominant modes of thought are dystopian for women" (116).

Chapter 1

Material Girls: Materiality as Female Empowerment

From the Empress's endless supply of "immaterial spirit" advisors to her own

disembodied travel, *Blazing World* contains a seemingly countless number of incorporeal

creatures. Disappearing female bodies also make their entrance in *Bell in Campo* as the armor-

wearing women cover their feminine figures so completely that others mistake them for "an

army of boys" (85). In *Convent of Pleasure* female corporeality similarly vanishes as the women

ostensibly forgo the physical world in favor of a spiritual life behind the convent's walls. While

the presence of immateriality appears counter to Cavendish's materialist views, a close reading

reveals that she placates any apparent tension. As much as they seem to vanish, women's bodies

also mark a focal point of her writings. For example, *Bell in Campo* reaches its climax with the

warrior women's might rescuing their husbands from the men's second defeat in the battle

against "the army of Faction" (*Bell* 84-86). Honoring the women's valor, their king declares that

the leader of the female army, Lady Victoria, will have her "figure" "cast in brass, and then set in

the midst of the city" (117). Essentially, his orders call for a large, everlasting monument to the

female form. When Cavendish does remove bodies from her texts, all depictions of immateriality

remain comic. In fact, the immaterial spirits' first appearance in *Blazing World* actually

underscores the impossibility of their existence as the Empress sees the spirits' "form" just

before the disembodied figures admit, "forms, and matter, are inseparable" (*Blazing* 53; 64).

Both satirizing the idea of immateriality and imbuing women's bodies with strength, Cavendish

celebrates the feminine form while refuting seventeenth-century discourse that used women's bodies to justify their sex's subjugation.

Although it permeates much of the *Blazing World*, the concept of immateriality inspires humor due to the uselessness and foolishness of the "immaterial spirits." By making any characters' serious contemplation about immateriality sound utterly nonsensical, Cavendish stresses the ridiculousness of the concept. The conversation between the Empress and her husband about preparing an army to save her homeland illustrates this satirical stance. Since the spirits "could not arm themselves, nor make any artificial arms," the Emperor suggests his wife find dead bodies for the spirits to inhabit (90). Things become even more bizarre. While the bodies could "be put in a posture for war," the Empress believes "it will be difficult to get so many dead bodies" and that all too soon "they would stink and dissolve; when they came to fight, they would moulder into dust and ashes" (91). The Empress continues:

> were it also possible, that those bodies were somehow preserved from stinking and dissolving, yet the souls of such bodies would not suffer immaterial spirits to rule and order them . . .which would produce a war between those immaterial souls, and the immaterial spirits in material bodies; all which would hinder them from doing any service in the actions of war, against the enemies of my native country. (91)

Her both grotesque and utterly ludicrous depiction portrays immateriality as of no use to anyone since the immaterial spirits would, even with bodies, prove unable to assist Empress in securing her homeland. Foolishness and immateriality again prove inseparable as even the usually rational Empress expresses uncharacteristically outlandish lines of thought when considering immaterial beings. While the depiction of rotting bodies does not make physicality particularly empowering,

the immaterial spirits' need for a corporeal dwelling does reverse the allocation of power in the material/immaterial binary because it frames the body as possessing capabilities that make it superior to immaterial entities.

Cavendish continues to belittle immateriality and its gendered implications by inverting the material/immaterial binary's traditional gendered associations. This inversion is most apparent when she links women to the immaterial mind. Though the spirits serve as the Empress's "advisors," she continually finds " some fault in their answers" (66). In addition to connecting immateriality to foolishness, the spirits' lack of knowledge becomes an opportunity for Cavendish to promote her own philosophical ideas. Taking it upon herself to correct the spirits' errors, the Empress expresses views that mirror those offered in Cavendish's *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*. In fact, the tale practically transforms into a philosophical treatise because the Empress's opinions so thoroughly saturate it at times. Readers experience a female character promoting a female philosopher's teachings. This setup connects women to the privileged rational, immaterial mind that early modern discourses situated as male.[1] Women then appear just as able to associate with the immaterial as men. Cavendish thus centers attention on the artificial nature of the binary's typical gendered associations. However, as discussed earlier, she never portrays immateriality very seriously. Her continued emphasis on the Empress's magnificent accouterments, the appearances of the Blazing World's animal-like inhabitants, and the Empress's beauty all undermine the idea of immateriality by reminding readers of everything's material existence.

Representations of female corporeality within the utopian worlds also boldly repudiates seventeenth-century notions that framed women's supposed physical frailty as a justification for their sex's subjugation.[2] In *Bell in Campo*, Lady Victoria's husband shares the era's views about

women's supposed physiological weakness as he affirms, "nature hath made women like china . . .they must be used gently" lest they " break and fall on death's head" (Bell 35; Aughterson 41-42; 134). Dispelling such accounts, Lady Victoria leads a group of female followers to join their husbands in military battle (35). Although military action links the women to a masculine form of power that early modern female-to-male transformation tales would warn against, Cavendish stresses their biological sex.[3] Lady Victoria's speech to her followers before their glorious victory illustrates this emphasis:

> Nobel Heroickesses, I have intelligence that the army of Reformation begins to flag, wherefore now or never is the time to prove the courage of our sex, to get liberty and freedom from the female slavery, and to make ourselves equal with men: for shall men only sit in Honor's chair, and women stand as waiters by? (81)

Feminized titles such as "heroickesses" ensure that readers take notice of the women's sex. In asking them to break free from gendered limitations that constitute "slavery," Victoria demands that women enter the traditionally masculine public sphere. Such gender transgression may provide freedom from "slavery," but it also explicitly requires them to act masculinely since they must take arms. However, Cavendish does not frame strength as a trait restricted to men. The speech actually disassociates 'masculine' strength from the male body by portraying women as capable of displaying such might. Furthermore, Lady Victoria's commentary underscores a natural equality between the sexes. Since entry into the public realm will allow the women to "make [them]selves equal with men," the women appear equal to men in essence—they simply must escape the "slavery" that hinders them from reaching their full potential. Here, such escape appears perfectly possible. After all, the women can and must "*make* [them]selves equal with men" according to Victoria (my emphasis). Cavendish's writing takes even more of a feminist

bent as the tale accentuates women's ability to gain such liberation. In the play's conclusion, the women do use their own might to gain greater equality as the king's new laws mandate.

Lady Victoria's speech also places great importance on the women's need to accumulate a rather masculine form of honor. During the Renaissance, honor was largely measured by public notice of one's virtue (Watson 19-67).[4] Virtues considered desirable in women stressed passivity, chastity, quietness, passivity, and obedience (Brown et al. 24; Wiesner 21). In her speech, honor appears only available via the traditionally masculine public sphere. Cavendish also ascribes her other female characters with masculine forms of honor.[5] Through her political might, philosophical knowledge, and religious authority the Empress in *The Blazing World* grasps various forms of traditionally masculine power.[6] The Empress's and the warrior women's gender transgression completely counter societal constructions of females as physically frail and naturally docile.[7] Quinsee discerningly notes that this portrayal of masculine women "carefully distinguishes between women and the feminine gender," indicating that Cavendish believed "that a gender role can be assumed despite the biological sex of a person" (98). Such differentiation between sex and gender makes women appear no more prone to any frailty associated with the feminine than men.

Although female characters often display physical might in rather masculine terms, depictions of female beauty illustrate women's unique corporeal power. Cavendish's portrayal of female bodies in *The Blazing World* initially lines up with Leslie's assertion that immateriality strengthens female characters. The tale even opens with the Lady's (soon-to-be Empress's) physical "beauty" attracting an amorous merchant who forcefully "steal[s] her away" (8,7). In an act of divine intervention, a storm pushes his boat into the Blazing World. While the abductor and his crew "all fr[eeze] to death," the Lady "only, by the light of her *beauty*, the *heat of her*

youth" survives (8, my emphasis). Rather than following early modern concepts of the humors by allocating the internal heat that supposedly signaled men's perfection, the Lady enjoys this perfection.[8] Female attractiveness also transforms from a source of vulnerability into a form of power. However, the merchant's severe punishment indicates that his lust is the force causing the Lady's troubles. Her youthful beauty represents a form of strength rather than a weakness since it saves her life. Even so, men's attraction again proves problematic for female agency later in the Blazing World. Upon her entry into the new world, the land's Emperor quickly "*ma[kes] her his wife, and g[ives] her absolute power*" over his kingdom (15, my emphasis). The Emperor's ability to "ma[ke]" "her his" through marriage illustrates the institution's ability to strip power from women and place it into the hands of men.[9] This fictive world then counters the gendered power structure of marriage since the Emperor offers the Empress all control before he nearly disappears from the text. Lastly, the Emperor's willingness to give control to the Lady indicates that her beauty overpowers him. Again, her physical form causes an increase in her overall authority. Since Cavendish allocates strength to women's bodies, hindrances to that might appear constructed rather than naturally linked to her sex's physical form.

Further distancing women's bodies from the cause of their inferior position in society, Cavendish frames societal attempts to control women's bodies via marriage as the force limiting female agency. Madam Passionate, a former widow in *Bell in Campo*, exemplifies marriage's negative impact on women. She describes her widowhood as a time when she "was rich, and lived in plenty" as "mistress of [her] self, estate and family, all [her] servants obeyed [her], none durst contradict [her]" (109). With absolute control over her possessions, including her self, Passionate enjoys utter freedom. Then she remarries. Her husband horribly mistreats her, publically "railing [her]" and spending her inheritance (109). Adding to her loss of authority, her

servants follow her husband's example by "slight[ing] and neglect[ing]" her (109). Reflecting further on her husband's cruelty, she says, "my marriage bed is like to prove my grave, whilst my husband's curses are my passing bell" (110). Her comments invite readers to connect her "husband's curses" that will serve as the "bell" marking her death to her overall loss of authority after she weds. With such a connection, marriage represents a force that hinders female agency so thoroughly that it essentially constitutes the death of female power. Readers may also take her words literally. Under such a reading, marriage appears detrimental enough to women that it brings about their deaths. Madam Passionate also explicitly compares marriage to slavery as she exclaims, "now I am made a slave" (109). Through the stark contrast between Passionate's freedom as an independent widow and her enslavement as a married woman, Cavendish explicitly links matrimony to a loss in female agency. This contrast additionally shows that women can both exercise and enjoy control when freed from the enslavement that marriage places them into. By using the word "slave," Cavendish underscores that women face unnatural, socially constructed positions of inferiority rather than any inborn inadequacies.

Once female characters remove themselves from marriage, they gain greater power over their own lives and bodies. Effectively safeguarding women from marriage, the *Convent of Pleasure* allows its ladies to bypass the subservient role marriage would require from wives.[10] Erin Lang Bonin stresses that the women's refusal to wed makes them "no longer mere appendages to their dowries, the means by through which men transfer land, goods, and cash"(123). Rather than functioning as "appendages" to money for men or objects owned by husbands, the convent's women control their own lives and production as they take up "every office and Employment" unavailable to women outside of the convent's walls (223).[11] Further elevating women's status, the convent as a symbol itself calls to light the Catholic faith where

women retain representation and reverence (Sierra 653).[12] However, nothing in the play indicates that religious activities take place there. Instead, Lady Happy describes her convent as "not a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Sense but to please them" (220). The convent provides sensory stimulation, allowing the women to fully enjoy their bodies as they order "the choisest Meats" and "take pleasure in [their own] Beauties" with the help a plethora of mirrors (225; 224). The women's lavish life style indicates that females can enjoy their own materiality without losing autonomy as long as they, rather than husbands, own their bodies. Thus, women's material existence does not limit female power; socially regulated male control over female bodies does.

Female-female relationships also showcase women's ability to enjoy their own bodies as it allows them to transcend the gender binary that frames their sex as inferior. Even though the women presumably give up romantic relationship (at least with men) upon entry into a convent, Cavendish intrinsically links Lady Happy's institution to sexuality. Always placing it in italics, Cavendish ensures that readers notice the convent's name, "*The Convent of Pleasure*" (224). Of course, "pleasure" evokes sexual connotations (224).[13] Cavendish further develops the convent's connection to sexuality as the women put on plays in which they "accoutre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts" (229). Transvestism allows the women to take on male roles while leaving open the possibility that romantic pairings could push beyond the confines of their staged performances. Cavendish entertains such possibilities. Happy herself shares "fervent" kisses and "fall[s] in Love" with the play's cross-dressing prince *while* he is disguised as a princess (234; 239). Since Cavendish does not reveal his biological sex to her readers or to the play's other characters until after the relationship takes a romantic turn, the attraction seemingly develops between two females. With women running the entire convent and possibly

able to pleasure each other, the space renders men completely unnecessary.[14] Having "no occasion for men," Happy's convent leaves males without any recognition in its power structure (223). Rather than simply reversing the gender roles by placing women in power and men in peripheral positions, Cavendish's lesbian coupling removes the gender hierarchy implicit in heterosexual relationships as well as men's association with any form of power. Her use of lesbianism as a means of avoiding the gender hierarchy inherent in heterosexual relationships then foreshadows later feminist thinkers like Monique Wittig who argue that females' homosexual relations move beyond the binary opposition between men and women (Butler 112-113).[15]

Lesbian relationships additionally free women from the heterosexual economy where they would produce children. Since the imperial race in the *Blazing World* carry out a horrific nine-month self-regeneration process that, as Leslie notes, "conjoin[s]" "childbirth to the suffering of plague victims," Cavendish's removal of heterosexual relationships blocks her female characters from associations with such gruesome processes (19). Goldberg points out, contra Leslie, the removal of childbirth does not detract from female materiality. Though Cavendish characterizes the relationship between the Empress and the Duchess as one of "platonic lovers," materiality remains oddly intact (*Blazing* 70). Cavendish, Goldberg notes, rejects the idea of Platonic lovers on the grounds that everything has a material existence. In her materialist thought, a person cannot have an immaterial mind for a Platonic lover to reside in (*Seeds* 148). Keeping with her rejection of the immaterial aspects of Platonic love, Cavendish continually entertains the idea that the women's "immaterial kisses" should worry the women's spouses as "husbands have reason to be jealous of platonic lovers, for they are very dangerous, as being not only very intimate and close, but subtle and insinuating"(58; 68). Citing her belief that

"thought is a sensitive touch," Goldberg affirms that the women's relationship takes a physical manifestation (Cavendish qtd. in *Seeds* 148). Thus, rather than marking a removal of materiality, Cavendish's rejection of childbirth remains intimately connected to her removal of heterosexual relationships that inspire an unfair allocation of power based on a gendered hierarchy.

Though Cavendish's depictions of lesbian relations offer radical reformulations of gendered allocations of power, Valerie Traub argues that the potential challenge to patriarchal order falls short of making a feminist statement. Analyzing *Convent Of Pleasure*, Traub takes issue with the fact that Lady Happy's lover is male. Traub interprets the prince's male identity as a relapse into compulsory heterosexuality that portrays homosexual relations as impossible. While Traub provides a thorough analysis, Cavendish significantly complicates such a reading. Despite the play's ending with the prince indentified as male and his marrying Lady Happy, the gender blending does not end. Cavendish places the list of characters *after* the play where, as Traub notes, Lady Happy's lover is listed as The Princess (Traub 180).[16] Although this fact does not explicitly change the play's ending, it strongly suggest that the play does not return to a heterosexual pairing. Instead it concludes with another instance of gender blending, where a female actress plays the prince/princess's part. The audience then sees a female actress disguised as a male who briefly masquerades as a female. Here, gender play has no end. Through the ongoing gender confusion, "gender" itself looses all meaning.

Cavendish similarly destabilizes gender distinctions throughout her work. The depictions of masculine women, multiple instances of transvestism, and alternative female sexual identities all exemplify her blurring of gender boundaries. Her satirical treatment of materiality and continued emphasis on women's bodily strength enable her utopian texts to thoroughly challenge her era's commonly held notions that posited women's bodies as a sign of their inferiority. At

times, her obscuration of gender divisions undermines the idea of "gender" entirely. In fact, one of her prefaces to her plays anticipates this blurring of gender boundaries as she writes, "I know there are many Scholastical and Pedantical persons that will condemn my writings, because I do not Keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, *as they call them*" (*Convent* 259, my emphasis). Whereas early modern discourse framed gender as the primary distinction between men and women, her rejection of the "Masculine and Feminine Genders" that "they" promote blatantly rebuffs such beliefs (Laqueur 8).[17] Additionally, her willingness to face criticism based on the gender transgressive nature of her texts suggests a belief that issues concerning gender called for public notice. She continues her attack on gender divisions and their inherent hierarchy through her depiction of effeminate men.

Chapter 1 Notes:

1. See Spelman's article for a historical account of mind/body dualism and its implications for women. See also Bazeley (sect. 2).

2. Aughterson points out that assertions about "women's bodily weakness are used to justify her political impotence" in early-modern writings (134). She also explains that women's reproduction function was viewed as an indicator of women's "social and political inferiority" (41).

3. Laqueur states that early modern tales of women transforming into men and vice versa served as warnings that compelled individuals to act according to one's gender (58).

4. Curtis Watson explains that the pursuit of honor was "an integral part of [the Renaissance man's] life's goal" and relied heavily upon public notice of one's virtue (72-73).

5. In her book *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, historian Merry E. Wiesner states that "men received the greatest praise for courage, wisdom, and power," which reflects the qualities that Cavendish's female characters display (21).

6. Analyzing the *Convent of Pleasure*, Horacio Sierra notes that Lady Happy's extremely brief theological debate "no matter how superficial," marks a woman's entrance into "an intellectual realm dominated by men" (650). In *Blazing World* Cavendish makes such an entry more explicit as the Empress brings Christianity to the Blazing World, leads its churches, and turns the land's female inhabitants into her "congregation" *Blazing World* (49).

7. See Mascetti for information about women's alleged inertness, especially in relation to seventeenth-century scientific discourse.

8. Aughterson explains that humoral theory framed women as wet and cold, while men represented heat and dry (42). According to these Galenic principles, men's heat symbolized a mark of perfect that pushed their sexual organs outside of the body. Cavendish's depiction of the men's cold, frozen bodies against the Lady's heat inverts gendered expectations. See also Lacqueur for more information about humoral theory.

9. Wiesner discusses women's legal rights in England after marriage. She states that "all goods or property that a woman brought into a marriage and all wages she earned during the marriage were considered property of her husband" (37). She also explains that a married woman "was not considered a legal person under common law . . .she could not accept a gift from her husband or make a will separate from him because they were 'one person'" (37). Marriage

effectively gave men greater financial and legal power by stripping these sources of control from wives.

10. During the early modern period, Wiesner explains, marriage was identified as part of "a divinely imposed order, which made woman subject to man" (28). She also states, "marriage manuals, household guides, and marriage sermons all stress[ed] the importance of husbandly authority and wifely obedience" (27).

11. Wiesner expounds on marriage's role in female exclusion from the public sphere saying, "marriage was cited as the key reason for excluding women from public offices and duties" because such engagement were believed to detract from a woman's responsibility to their husbands. Since unmarried women *could* wed in the future, Wiesner notes, they too could not enter the public realm (37).

12. Horcia Sierra argues that, despite the lack of religious activity, Cavendish's choice to set the tale in a convent does increase the women's overall image by connecting them to Catholicism and the female power recognized within that faith (653).

13. The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains entries for "pleasure" dating from the early seventeenth century that use the word's sexual connotation.

14. Bonin similarly calls attention to the women's ability to sexual please each other without the need for men. Additionally, she notes that "homoeroticism often colored representations of the convent" in early modern works (123).

15. Butler provides information about some of Wittig's theories, including her ideas about lesbianism (112-113).

16. Cavendish's decision to revert back to princess in the cast list suggests some "unconscious discomfort" with the return to a male-female pairing, in Traub's analysis (Traub 180).

17. Laqueur argues that gender was viewed as the "*real*" distinction between men and women until the Enlightenment (8, original emphasis).

Chapter 2

Effeminate Adam, Virtuous Eve?
Rethinking Gender Roles in the Fall

Males like the cross-dressing prince from *Convent of Pleasure* fall short of

encapsulating the definition of masculinity. Instead, such men epitomize gender blending with

their shockingly successful mixtures of masculinity and femininity. The prince's feminine guise

even proves convincing enough for him to join the female-only convent. While this gender play

proves emasculating, as in the prince's case, male characters do retain forms of influence that

prevent such transgression from erasing their identities as men. Specifically, males continually

threaten the surrounding paradisiacal female-run spaces. In creating this distinction between

males and females, Cavendish employs a sophisticated form of gender blending that engages

with the Genesis narrative of the Garden.[1] As the first woman, any vice or action linked to Eve

also colored perceptions about women as a group and their relationship to men. Numerous

Renaissance political writings looked to the relationship between Adam and Eve as a

justification of both a husband's dominance over a wife and, as an extension, the government's

control over the populace (Miller 2). Eden also haunted publications involved in England's

gender debate concerning women's nature and proper place in society as many contributors

discussed Eve's culpability in their arguments (Miller 19).[2] The Royal Society, a major force in

the rise of experimental science, produced publications and promotional pieces that framed

scientific inquiry as a way of returning to a prelapsarian existence (Miller 138-145).[3] Whereas

Eve's quest for knowledge initiated the fall, the Royal Society gendered reason male and framed

that masculine faculty as a means of remedying *her* mistake (Miller 138). Thus, the Fall directly

influenced the theological, political, and social context in which gender divisions were defined

and maintained. Cavendish disrupts the anti-feminist connotations of the narrative by reversing the Fall's gendered implications. In her works men take responsibility for damaging paradise. By presenting effeminate male characters that take on Eve's role in the Fall, Cavendish both destabilizes gender hierarchy and challenges the legitimacy of male dominance.

Through men's relinquishment of power in the public sphere, Cavendish both emasculates her male characters and frames their sex as unfit to rule the very sphere they abandon. The previously mentioned prince neglects his duties as sovereign in order to live disguised as a princess within the convent. His transvestism provides a visualization of the gender transgressive nature of his turn from the public to private realm. Traub explains that the convent's opulence, complete with "floor[s] strew'd with sweet Flowers" and "beds of Velvet, lined with Sattin," carried strong associations with femininity (224; Traub 179). His retreat to the convent suggests that he too indulgences in these feminine luxuries, which strengthens his association with femininity.[4] The prince does not return to his kingdom until an "Embassador" of his breaks into the convent to inform him that "[his] Subjects are so discontented at [his] Absence" and that they assume he is "restrained as Prisoner" (243, original emphasis). Since this scene also marks the play's climax where the prince's true (male) identity gets revealed, Cavendish underscores his abandonment of his responsibility as ruler. As a male recklessly leaving his kingdom, he and, by extension, males do not display any dedication to the public good. *Blazing World* similarly depicts men as unsuited for governmental positions.

Whereas marriage barred women from participating in the public sphere, the Blazing World's Emperor retreats to the private realm after his wedding (Wiesner 37).[5] In his first appearance, he willingly transfers "absolute power to rule" to the Empress (15). Then Cavendish does not write about him for half of the tale. His lack of involvement completely contrasts his

wife's constant improvements to the state. Therefore, their relationship inverts gender assignments typically associated with private and public spheres since she acts as the ideal monarch while he presumably remains in the castle. His lack of speech further emasculates him because early modern beliefs framed silence as a feminine virtue (Brown et al. 4).[6] Even more damaging to his potentially masculine image, his few speeches indicate a lack of 'masculine' reason that his wife possesses.[7] While the Empress knows her immaterial spirits cannot aid her in war, her husband makes the illogical suggestion that she find dead "men's bodies" for the spirits to inhabit so "they may be serviceable in all the actions of war" (90). By fashioning his belief in immateriality as an indicator of his foolishness, Cavendish mocks all men's use their supposed link to immateriality as an indicator of their sex's superiority.[8] Further reversing gendered expectations, the Emperor essentially declares himself unsuited to discuss matters of the state. Rather than providing useful advice to the Empress as she prepares to save her homeland, he suggests she "confer with" another woman, her "dear Platonic friend the Duchess of Newcastle" (91). With the Emperor's resignation from both control of and discussion about the kingdom, men remain outside of the Blazing World's political structure. Since female rule leaves the Blazing World "so well ordered that it could not be mended," women appear both more dedicated to and capable of governing than men (91).

   The removal of masculine strength from male bodies marks another extremely visible example of male feminization in Cavendish's utopian works. *Bell in Campo* illustrates this eradication of males' physical might when a citizen relates the female army's victorious attack on the army of faction:

   [the female army] did only rout this army of Faction, killing and wounding many,

    and set their own countrymen at liberty, and recovered their losses, and gained

many spoils, and took numbers of prisoners of their enemies . . .but upon this

victory the masculine sex of the army of Reformation was much out of

countenance, being doubly or trebly overcome, twice by their enemy, and then by

the gallant actions of the females which out-did them . . . . (85)

Though the battleground would typically offer men an opportunity to gain honor through a show

of bravery, the men's public loss of face damages their honor by diminishing their public esteem

(Watson 72). In the early modern period, strength represented one major "masculine"

characteristic that supposedly differentiated men from women (Foyster 29). The women's

"gallant actions" leave the men without a special claim to strength that would traditionally

distinguish them from the feminine (Foyster 31). In referring to the men as the "masculine sex,"

the passage conveys great irony because it emphasizes the men's lack of strength and, by

extension, masculinity. Having surpassed the men in battle, the women's possession of physical

might makes them more masculine than the supposed "masculine army." Through seemingly

misapplying the term 'masculine' in reference to the men rather than to the valiant women, the

passage highlights the gender blending. Rather than masculinity, "sex" transforms into the only

true marker of difference between males and females. Gender appears fluid while "sex" remains

distinct since the passage highlights both the distinctiveness of the men's sex and the women

possession of masculinity. Cavendish's inversion of gendered expectations concerning physical

strength then gesture toward breaking down the gender binary by separating gender from sex and

ascribing the former with a fluidity that has no meaningful relation to one's physical form.

Furthermore, the men's "trebl[e]" losses make them appear incapable of protecting the state and,

therefore, unable to carry out their duty to the public sphere. With females appearing better

suited to protect the state, Cavendish brings both men's place in and women's exclusion from the public arena into question.

Further challenging men's standing in the public sphere, Cavendish emphasizes male lust to frame their sex as unable to deny temptations that threaten social order. Renaissance ideologies posited men's supposed superior share of reason as a force that gave them greater control over their sexual desires than women possessed (Foyster 29). With Eve's giving into the serpent's lure, the Garden narrative too depicts women as vulnerable to enticement (Genesis 3.4-6). Misogynistic works invested in the gender debate used the biblical tale as historical evidence to argue for women's inferiority.[9] Male characters display such weaknesses in Cavendish's tales. *The Blazing World* even opens with a merchant whose "love growing more and more vehement upon him" leads him to abduct the beautiful future Empress (7). His actions disrupt several social regulations aimed at preserving order. First, he blatantly ignores the order established by formal marriage arrangements. As a man "beneath her both in birth and wealth," the merchant additionally undermines social order by forcing a union between people of very different classes (*Blazing* 7; O'Day 70-71).[10] The merchant's lustful nature reconfigures seventeenth-century ideas that framed women as less able to control their sexual urges (Wiesner 37). Additionally, his inability to control himself indicates a lack of supposedly 'masculine' reason, which was believed to prevent one from acting so basely (Foyster 40). His lust also disrupts males' privileged ties to immateriality because it intimately connects men to corporeal desires. Cavendish's application of the sin also ascribes male characters with traditionally feminine traits, since the merchant's lust inverts seventeenth-century beliefs that gendered reason, self-control, and immateriality unequivocally male (Bazeley, sec. 2; Butler 12; Cunning; Foyster 29-30; Spelman). Whereas Eve's vulnerability to Satan's temptation resulted in the loss of perfect order,

the merchant's inability to ward off temptation makes males responsible for destabilizing social

organization. Men appear not only less fit to govern society, but also likely to destroy it.

Cavendish's systematic remove of male sexuality from her Edenic spaces continues

to emasculate male characters while depicting them as incompatible with perfect social order. By

just the second page, she begins purging *Blazing World* of male sexuality as "Heaven" punishes

the lusty merchant and his crew by freezing them all to death (7-8). Given the men's ties to

sexuality, their deaths function as a figurative castration. With "Heaven" carrying out the

punishment, the baseness of merchant's lust shines through. As a result of calling attention to his

lust, the loss of masculinity associated with his inability to control himself also returns to the

forefront. The merchant's behavior also appears counter to God's intended plan since his actions

prove punishable by "Heaven" (8). Since the merchant and his crew go against heavenly orders

and die during the passage to the imperial "city named Paradise," male sexuality is literally

unable to enter "Paradise" (13). Further creating a rift between Paradise and male desire, the

imperial city features literal male castration as the Empress almost immediately encounters

eunuchs there. Cavendish also explicitly compares the Blazing World to Eden. The immaterial

spirits tell the Empress that "Paradise. . .[i]s the world she live[s] in at present," just before the

Empress begins asking about what had "frightened Adam out of the Paradise" (57). As Shannon

Miller notes, Cavendish takes this moment to erase any blame from women (150). When the

Empress asks "how it came that both spirits and men did fall from a blessed state," her

immaterial spirits point to man's "disobedience" (65). However, they do not blame Eve because

they do know from "whence this disobedient sin did preceded" (65).[11] With the disappearance of

Eve's guilt, women (due to their association with Eve) are freed from any role in instigating the

Fall.

Although male sexuality disappears from *Blazing World*, one must note that the

principal female characters do have husbands. Even so, their husbands appear feminized to the

extent that they no longer share a connection to male sexuality and the disorder associated with

it. The relationship between the fictional "Duchess of Newcastle" and her husband, "the Duke of

Newcastle" illustrates such a point.[12] In the scene where both the Empress and the Duchess travel

as spirits and "enter into" the Duke of Newcastle's body, the Duke appears rather feminized (81).

Albeit a non-sexual act, the spirits' ability to penetrate him highlights a rather bold inversion of

male and female roles. In light of Cavendish's rejection of immaterial existence, any "enter[ing]"

going on between the Duke and the disembodied ladies remains removed from the real where her

female characters would be the ones penetrated. As such, it does not destabilize order. The

Emperor similarly appears both removed from sexuality and unable to threaten the tale's utopian

space. When describing his first meeting with the Empress, Cavendish writes:

> No sooner was the Lady brought before the Emperor, but he conceived her to be
>
> some goddess, and offered to worship her; which she refused, telling him. . .was
>
> she but a mortal; at which the Emperor rejoicing, made her his wife, and gave her
>
> absolute power to rule and govern all that world that she pleased. But her subjects,
>
> who would hardly be persuaded to believe her mortal, tendered her all the
>
> veneration and worship due to a deity. (15)

Though he does "ma[ke] her his wife," he initially believes he should worship her. After she

convinces him of her mortality they wed. Even so, the Emperor remains unseen and unheard of

for the majority of the tale. Readers rarely receive any information about the couple interacting at

all. Although a lack of interaction does not preclude the possibility of a sexual relationship, it

does significantly lessen the probability of one. The Emperor may still very well offer "her all

the worship due a deity," given his initial response to her beauty as well the subjects' continued worship.

When male sexuality does enter the utopian spaces, men take on Eve's as seducers and destroyers of paradisiacal communities. *Convent of Pleasure* offers the most striking example. Things go awry shortly after Lady Happy welcomes the mysterious foreign ruler she believes is a princess. This foreign figure, the cross-dressing prince, stands as the play's most lustful character. Immediately after entering the convent, he attempts to woo Lady Happy with his words, hug her, and kiss her with "a kind of Titilation, and more Vigorous" than women use (244). The prince most clearly takes on the role of seducer just before he and Happy begin their staged performance as shepherd and shepherdess, respectively:

> Prin: Can any Love be more virtuous, innocent and harmless then ours?
>
> L. Happy: I hope not.
>
> Prin: Then let us please our selves, as harmless Lovers use to do.
>
> L. Happy: How can harmless Lovers please themselves?
>
> Prin: Why very well, as, to discourse, imbrace and kiss, so mingle souls together.
>
> L. Happy: But innocent lovers do not use to kiss.
>
> Prin: Not any act more frequent amongst us Women-kind; nay, it were a sin in friendship, should not we kiss; then let us not prove our selves Reprobates.
> *They imbrace and kiss, and hold each other in their Arms.*
>
> Prin: These my Imbraces though of Femal kind,
>
> May be as fervent as a Masculine mind. (234).

A "virtuous, innocent, harmless" love might describe Lady Happy's affection, but the prince clearly has less than "innocent" intentions. As he appears to make the speech with the end goal

of making physical contact, this scene underscores his lustful nature. His "fervent" "Imbraces" magnify this lust, especially when set against Lady Happy's evident reservation. The scene also marks a clear change in the degree of femininity associated with the prince. Although Lady Happy (as well as Cavendish's audience) still mistakes him for a princess, here he makes his first appearance in masculine attire. Due to his male clothing, the prince's actions reflect men's behavior rather than women's. Lady Happy's modesty and the prince's seething desire also make women appear less lust-driven than men. Similarly connecting men to uncontrolled passion, "Femal kind" denotes an "Imbrace" of less intensity than the " fervent" one the prince's "Masculine mind" pursues. With origins in a "Masculine mind," lust gains a loose association with men at large.

Additionally, this particular scene allows the prince to take on a rather serpentine image. First, he proves himself a liar by falsely offering a "harmless love." Nothing about him or his affection appears "harmless." He threatens to take Lady Happy "by force of Arms" if she refuses to marry him. Then, he annihilates the convent as well as the female agency once celebrated there (244). Echoing the connection between male sexuality and violence seen in the *Blazing World* (via the merchant), the prince's threat of force ties his lusty "Masculine mind" to a violence that forces women into submission. Then, male lust and the accompanying threats of violence act as compulsory forces that *make* Lady Happy leave the well-ordered world of her convent. Rather than women succumbing to temptation and instigating a fall from perfection, male figures compel women to leave paradise. Second, the prince practically stands in opposition to God. Although the convent does not emphasize religious activity, it still functions as a symbol with religious connotations. Therefore, the prince's desire for Lady Happy and his subsequent seduction attempts transform him into a "Reprobat[e]" (117). After all, he removes Happy from

an ostensible lifetime commitment to God. His destruction of the convent repeats this disruption of female religious commitment on a large scale. Furthermore, the fact that the prince seduces Lady Happy without any outside encouragement and removes women from their religious devotion to God suggest that he might take on Satan's role rather than strictly Eve's. By depicting men as the party responsible for the Fall, Cavendish makes their sex seems more likely to threaten social order than to preserve it. Men do not seem fit to dominate the public sphere because they threaten its order. As the entities responsible for the Fall, men should presumably take on the inferior societal positions that they forced women into because of females' connections Eve.

Cavendish's radical reassignment of gender roles places all the vice and destruction traditionally ascribed to women onto men. Continually, males and their uncontrollable desires prove hazardous to the idyllic order that permeates her female-governed worlds. In contrast to the prominence of male vice and destruction, female characters remain distanced from any role in instigating the Fall. Even Eve's guilt disappears. Cavendish's take on the Garden narrative releases women from the inferior positions that her sex's association with Eve perpetuated.[13] Women, such as the Empress, even take responsibility for preserving these picturesque spaces as they govern the utopias in which they reside. Her tales offer women who appear more capable than men of taking a meaningful position in the public sphere, which forces readers to reexamine gendered allocations of power. Cavendish daringly counters her era's prevailing discourse that used Adam and Eve's story to perpetuate female oppression. She renders the founding narrative's gender expectations wholly inaccurate in an effort to dismantle a powerful mechanism that limited female agency. Her take on the Fall counters a narrative of oppression with one of liberation where women may exercise power and serve public interest. Even in the

dissolution of female-run spaces, Cavendish's utopian texts offer a critical, feminist

reexamination of patriarchal order.

Chapter 2 Notes:

1. Shannon Miller's *Engendering the Fall* includes a chapter focusing on *Blazing World* and Cavendish's feminist retailing of the Genesis tale. According to Miller, Cavendish removes women's blame for the fall in order to place it on "experimental philosophers and Cabbalist alike" for causing disruptions in society by pushing past "the boundaries of knowledge" (150). I follow a similar line of thought, focusing primarily on the role of vice and sexuality rather than the role of "knowledge" and "science" Miller focuses on (167).

2. Miller states that the gender debate has its roots in Medieval anti-feminist arguments and saw a reemergence in England after Joseph Swetnam's infamous 1615 anti-women pamphlet. Rachel Speght and other women (along male authors writing under female pseudonyms) published pamphlets that presented defenses against such misogynistic works (Miller 19). While the pamphlet debate itself cooled, Miller stresses that other genres absorbed and continued to debate women's nature and place in society throughout the seventeenth century (19).

3. Although Cavendish wrote against experimental science, Sylvia L. Bowerbank and Sara H. Mendelson's introductory chapter to *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* lists Cavendish as the first woman to visit the Royal Society (24). Like Miller, Mascetti too includes information on the Royal Society's discourse and Cavendish's reaction to it.

4. In her book, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage*, Elizabeth A. Foyster states that "manhood" "was concerned with a rejection of 'feminine' qualities" (31). Cavendish's gender blending seemingly attacks his manhood by associating him with the feminine.

5. See Wiesner for more information about marriage's impact on female agency.

6. When listing virtues considered important for women in the early modern period, Meg Lota Brown and Kari Boyd McBride state, "the ideal woman was chaste, silent, and obedient" (4).

7. See Cunning, Bazeley (sect. 2.1), Foyster, Butler (12), or Spelman for information about historical beliefs in which reason was gendered male.

8. See note 7. See also Foyster (29).

9. See Miller for more about the gender debate's use of Eve's role in the Fall to define women's nature.

10. Rosemary O'Day's book, *Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies*, provides detailed information about the formal processes involved with arranging marriages in early modern England as well as the significance of these

formalities. Additionally, she discusses the early modern emphasis on marriage "partners" "be[ing] equally socially and economically matched" as a means of maintaining order through one's "social networks" (71;70).

11. Miller too notes these lines and the erasure of Eve's culpability within them. In her critical examination of *The Blazing World*, the Empress's entry into the utopian space marks a reentry into Eden where the Empress rewrites the tale. According to Miller, the Empress saves the world by preventing the Cabbalists and experimental scientists within the Blazing World from pushing "beyond the boundaries of knowledge" (151).

12. As the fictional "Duchess" holds Cavendish's name, the character's husband bears the name of Cavendish's actual husband (William Newcastle).

13. Miller seems to agree as she argues that the Empress's power within her marriage proves indicative of her having "redeem[ed] women from the subsequent hierarchy plotted onto marital and political structures" as a result of the Fall (151). Miller also provides more information about seventeenth-century uses of the Garden narrative to justify women's subordinate position in society.

Chapter 3

Public Struggles & Private Spheres: Obtaining Power in Paradise

As spaces allowing for greater female agency, Cavendish's utopian worlds represent female power. However, many of them prove evanescent. Both the all-female and all-male circles in *Bell in Campo* nearly come with expiration dates. After the play's great war, one fully anticipates the army units to dissolve as they do. Similarly, Lady Happy's convent faces destruction. For some critics, such as Traub, these dissolving spaces significantly hinder a feminist reading (178). While the convent's fall does indicate a loss of female power, it also allows for a feminist retelling of the Garden narrative that reallocates blame to males. At the same time, one wonders why the convent faces total annihilation while the Empress's Blazing World remains intact. Struggles for power within Cavendish's utopian texts are key to answering such questions. Despite the differing conclusions, all the plots center on women's search for greater agency as they navigate both the public and private spheres. Utopian worlds in which women extend their power to the public realm remain most stable. On the other hand, female-run spaces where females fail to stretch their influence beyond the private world eventually collapse. For example, Lady Happy retreats further from the public world and, in the end, loses her convent. In privileging only utopian spaces where women transcend gender boundaries by entering the public realm, Cavendish frames engagement in the public sphere as necessary for female empowerment while challenging the gendered hierarchy that hinders her sex from such involvement.

Though Lady Happy doubts if anything exists "in the publick World" for women, she too shines light on women's lack of power within the private sphere (218). Before opening her convent, she contemplates women's few options in the domestic world:

> would a Marry'd life have more crosses and sorrows then pleasure, freedom, or happiness: nay Marriage to those that are virtuous is a greater restraint then a Monastery. Or should I take delight in Admirers? they might gaze on my Beauty, and praise my Wit, and I receive nothing from their eyes, nor lips; for Words vanish as soon as spoken, and Sights are not substantial. Besides, I should loose my Reputation by their visits, then gain by their Praises . . . . (*Convent* 218)

Her lamentation conveys a simple wish for "pleasure, freedom, or happiness" that, as Happy states, marriage takes from women. By listing all the various facets of coupling that may potentially damage a woman's "Reputation," her comments stress females' vulnerability in pairings with males. Then, once again, the gender hierarchy implicit in heterosexual relationships represents a negative force in women's lives. As such, the domestic realm in which women tend to their husbands' needs promises women only "sorrows."[2] Although "pleasure" appears in her list of desires, her clear disinterest in men significantly lessens any connection between her and lust (at least any of a heterosexual nature). Therefore, the later romantic scenes with the prince appear even more clearly instigated by *his* urges rather than hers. As such, she comes across as virtuous while his villainy shines through.

The prince's elimination of the convent also serves Cavendish's feminist agenda by associating the public sphere with access to power and urging readers to question the merits of men's rule. Notably, the play ends with the prince exerting a great amount of control as he compels Lady Happy to marry him, dissolves the convent, and orders another character named

Mimick to "speak the *Epilogue*" (246, original emphasis). As a governmental figure who controls everyone in his vicinity, the prince reminds readers of the power available in the public realm. However, the prince abuses this control. As previously noted, the fact that he annihilates the convent in pursuit of his own lust turns him into a recognizably corrupt character. His immoral nature makes his hold of power appear unjust. Since he stands as the play's only major male character, men's morality and fitness to lead as a group comes into question. The prince also illustrates that males gain much of their power from manipulating women, which further frames their sex's rule as unfair. Audiences would *see* him dictate the women's fate as he makes decisions about the convent's future while on stage. As such, his control over women provides a visual representation of his influence. Additionally, he manipulates the institution's women by fooling them with his feminine disguise. Through this deception he again increases his share of power. Without masquerading as a princess, he could not access Lady Happy. Since marriage signaled a movement into adulthood during the early modern period and would also imply that he could leave an heir, his union with Happy allows him to transform his image from that of a young, uncommitted prince to that of a kinglike figure (Foyster 46).[3] In fact, he only returns to a position of leadership in his kingdom after marrying Happy. Giving the play's last lines to a character named "Mimick" calls further attention to the prince's time spent mimicking a princess and the benefits he reaps as a result of it.[4] The prince's female disguise also suggests that women possess a certain degree of power since he must essentially live as a woman in order to get the control he later obtains. Due to the fact that the prince primarily gains and exercises his power by using women, his authority appears highly dependent upon females. His need for women destabilizes the gender binary by highlighting that men require women in order to possess the public power that they bar females from accessing. With men gaining power only from

manipulating women, gender hierarchy too appears arbitrary.

The prince's time practically living as a woman paired with his praises of Lady Happy's "Wit" and "mind" may lead one to think that his marriage will avoid the "crosses and sorrows" associated with "Marry'd life" (237; 218). However, the domestic world offers little to no hope of female happiness in Cavendish's work. Underscoring the incompatibility of marriage with women's felicity, characters note that a wedding will not leave Happy "happy" since "she must change her Name; for the Wife takes the Name of her Husband" (221). Cavendish's use of the name "Happy" clearly accentuates marriage's threat to female happiness. Prior to Happy's marriage, the play follows women taking on new professions and enjoying their bodies on their own terms. This earlier emphasis on female self-exploration heightens the sense of sadness concerning Happy's loss of selfhood. The removal of her name also signifies the erasure of female identity. Marriage even erodes women physically. Lady Happy literally starts disappearing as she "becom[es] lean and pale" after the prince woos her (239). The fact that "the Wife takes the Name of her Husband" reminds readers that the prince's identity will, in a way, replace Happy's. Given his lack of moral character, this replication of the male seems less than ideal. Thus, marriage, for its threat to happiness and its erasure of identity, proves extremely detrimental to women.[5] Through marriage's negative portrayal, Cavendish guarantees that women will not be content within the institution and the domestic realm it intrinsically limits her sex to.[6]

Although the public sphere does not foster female power, Lady Happy appears to retreat into it when fashioning her convent. While the space initially allows women to avoid the many pitfalls of marriage, it completely removes them from the public arena. At first, the convent seems empowering. Without the burdens of husbands or children, Happy and her followers can

enjoy the intellectual and sensual pleasures of their "several Recreations" (229). Women also avoid the risks to their agency that marriage brings. Even so, the convent fails to protect its leader from a forced marriage. Happy and her convent's fate appear much less surprising when one realizes that the convent does not require its women to truly push beyond the private sphere. Lady Happy's plans for the space elucidate the connection:

> Order'd this our *Convent of Pleasure*; first, I have such things as are for our Ease and Conveniency; next for Pleasure, and Delight; as I have change of Furniture, for my house; according to the four Seasons of the year, especially our Chambers: As in the Spring, our Chambers are hung with Silk-Damask, and all other things suitable to it. . . . (225)

Though the space allows women to enjoy their own bodies and sensual pleasures, one notices that Lady Happy spends a great deal of time thinking about household details like interior decorating. In planning for "change[s] of Furniture" and seasonal changes in decor, Happy does not seem to differ from a wife organizing a large estate. Since she begins thinking about "[her] house" in its entirety before moving to details about the individual "Chambers," her thoughts progress further into the private realm. This movement into increasingly restricted spaces within a home calls attention to Happy's deep ties to the domestic sphere. Her mind appears bound up in "Chambers" of the "house." In light of men's position of power as head of household, the prince's ability to take control within the 'domestic sphere' of the convent should not shock readers. In order to enjoy real power, Cavendish demands her female protagonists to extricate themselves from the domestic realm. Lady Happy appears mentally incapable of such a move.

In contrast to Lady Happy, the women in *Bell in Campo* transcend the gendered limitations of the domestic sphere by making their way into the public arena. Though married,

Lady Victoria refuses to remain limited to the household. She demands to join the war efforts. In a witty argument spanning nearly two pages, she convinces her husband to take her along with him to battle:

> my fearful mind will transform every object like as your pale ghost until I am smothered in my sighs, shrouded in my tears, and buried in my grief's . . .as for honour . . . the most perfectest and constantest wife in her husband's absence was Penelope, Ulysses' wife, yet she. . .lost the kingdom, which was her husband's estate and government, which was a dishonor both to her and to her husband so if you let me stay behind you, it will be a thousand to one but either you will lose me in death, or your honour in life, where if you let me go you will save both . . .and what is more lawful, fitting, and proper, than for a man and wife to be inseparable together? (36)

In framing her engagement with state-level issues as a way of remaining "inseparable" from her husband, Lady Victoria subverts the limitations that marriage placed on her sex's entry into the public sphere (Wiesner 37). The numerous points used to progress her overall argument showcase her rhetorical skills. Recognizing her abilities, her husband responds, "you have used so much rhetoric to persuade, as you have left me none to deny you" (37). Due to the early modern conception of rhetorical skill as a sign of wit, this passage also highlights Lady Victoria's mental capacity (Crane 9).[7] Since wit represents a mental faculty, Victoria's rhetoric showcases women's mental capabilities. She also essentially outwits her husband through her persuasive, well-constructed argument. Therefore, women's intelligence appears possibly superior to men's. This assertion of women's mental prowess counters seventeenth-century

discourse that framed men's supposed greater mental faculties as a sign of their sex's superiority.[8]

Cavendish then rewards Victoria and her warrior women's participation in the state by offering them stupendous benefits. Though the female army dissolves with the war's closure, their entry into the public realm provides "Honou[r]" to their sex since the king publically notes and rewards their "triumphant" wartime commitment (81).[9] After fighting in battle, the women and "all [their] sex" are presented with eleven new rules that place them "above their husbands" in the home, allow them to "keep the purse," and enable them to "go abroad when they will, without control, or giving account thereof" (117).[10] Lady Victoria enjoys added benefits for having inspired women to take arms. The seventh law presented to Lady Victoria marks a clear division between the women who joined the military and those that did not as it states:

> all those women that have committed such faults as are a dishonour to the female
>
> sex, shall be more severely punished than heretofore, in not following [Lady
>
> Victoria's] exemplary virtues, and those who have followed [Lady Victoria's]
>
> example shall have respective honour done to them by the state. (117)

Given the importance of public acknowledgement in establishing one's "honour," the "state['s]" recognition of their efforts and "exemplary virtues" provides the women with a great increase in "honour" (Watson 19-67). Here, one's honor appears relative to one's engagement with the public realm since women who did not battle bring "dishonour to the female sex." To achieve "honour," Cavendish's female characters must cross gender boundaries by entering the public sphere. Since homebound women cannot benefit from the king's laws, only women who engage with the outside world can receive meaningful increases in power.

By centering on an extremely masculine means of entering the public sphere (war), the passage accentuates the gender transgressive nature of the women's entry into the public realm. Though the women display physical might, Cavendish retains her emphasis on the women's sex by referring to them as "the female sex." Such emphasis on the women's existence as "female[s]" intensifies the reader's awareness of the gender blending involved.[11] The law's ability to " punis[h]" women who have failed to enter the public realm implies that women have the same duty to the state as one might expect the land's men to have (117).Through women's connection to the public sphere, Cavendish destabilizes men's privileged position within that realm. She also frames *not* transcending the private world as both punishable and dishonorable for females. Such a framework indicates that women must enter the public arena and that they can achieve just as much there as men.

Blazing World epitomizes female involvement in the public sphere and stands as the only female-run utopian space that does not dissolve. The Empress of the tale runs every part of the public realm. Moreover, after she enters into the tale's fictional depiction of England she "not only save[s] her native country, but ma[kes] it the absolute monarchy of all that world" (100). Through the Empress's appearance, Cavendish creates a symbol of female engagement with the traditionally masculine public sphere. When describing the Empress's attire, Cavendish writes:

> on her head she wore a cap of pearl, and a half-moon of diamonds just before it;
> on the top of her crown came spreading over a broad carbuncle, cut in the form of
> the sun; her coat was of pearl, mixed with blue diamonds, and fringed with red
> ones; her buskins and sandals were of green dominions; which buckler was made
> of that sort of diamond as has several different colors; and being cut and made in
> the form of an arch, showed like a rainbow; in her right hand she carried a spear

made of a white diamond, cut like a tail of a blazing star, which signified that she

was ready to assault those that proved her enemies. (15)

Here, the protagonist represents female involvement with the public realm in appearance, action, and title. The precious stones of various colors "show[ing] like a rainbow," impart a luminous quality to the Empress's clothing. As a nearly glowing figure, she embodies the brightly shining Blazing World. Her gem attire also imparts a strength and impenetrability to her person, making her clothing somewhat militaristic and, therefore, masculine. Since her armor-like covering signals her position as ruler, the gender transgressive nature of her attire echoes the crossing of gender boundaries involved in a female's engagement with the state. Her "spear" further emphasizes such gender blending because of its form, which suggests a phallic symbol.

Cavendish's choice not to disrupt the world where a woman runs all aspects of the public arena speaks to her overall feminist statement. Her various utopian pieces depict men's control in the domestic sphere and women's lack of power there alongside portrayals of women reaching glorious new heights after dedicating themselves to the state. In only preserving female power in texts where women fully enter the public realm, she challenges gender hierarchies that hinder female agency by demonstrating women's ability to lord over the public world just as well as (if not better than) men. Through this setup, Cavendish additionally presents entry to the public world as necessary to increase her sex's agency. With its bear-men, other animal-like inhabitants, and Emperor who willingly transfers all authority to the Empress, *The Blazing World* clearly offers the greatest amount of female power and contains the most fantastical setting of Cavendish's utopian worlds. As such, it represents the very text where a woman most clearly interacts with the world beyond the domestic and the piece most removed from reality. Naturally, one wonders why Cavendish necessitates women's entry into the public realm, yet complicates

such entry. In order to push beyond the private sphere, all her female characters must make all-female worlds of their own. This apparent rift between what appears possible in her portrayal of "reality" and her texts' demand for women to enter the public realm certainly warrants critical discussion. As Bonin points out, the radical separation of Cavendish's female utopias from male-governed spaces seems to frame the patriarchal order found in the real world as dystopian for women (123; 127).[12] Cavendish's work proves even more fascinating when one considers her emphasis on women's minds. For example, Lady Victoria's wit and the Empress's philosophical musing gain notice throughout the characters' respective tales. Given her materialist conception of the mind and its thoughts, one wonders how she believed her imagined spaces of increased female agency could materialize and to what ends.

Chapter 3 Notes:

1. In opposition to Traub, Bonin argues that the utopian spaces in Cavendish's plays dissolve "as if to demonstrate that culturally dominant modes of thought are dystopian for women" (116). While the dissolving worlds do convey an opposition between women's utopian worlds and the world of men, I affirm that Cavendish preserves her female-run worlds in relation to how far the women within them thrust themselves into the public arena. Bonin agrees that Cavendish's utopian projects "question 'natural' gender hierarchies that bar [women] from [political] engagement" (117).

2. In the early modern period, Wiesner, notes "marriage manuals, household guides, and marriage sermons all stress[ed] the importance of husbandly authority and wifely obedience" (27). She also expounds on marriage's role in female exclusion from the public sphere saying, "marriage was cited as the key reason for excluding women from public offices and duties" because such engagements were believed to detract from a woman's responsibility to their husbands (37). Since unmarried women *could* wed in the future, Wiesner notes, they too could not enter the public realm (37).

3. Foyster affirms that, in the early modern England, "manhood was a stage in life" one entered "when youth ended with marriage" (46).

4. Mimick also appears as a villain in Cavendish's play called *The Bridals*.

5. Critic Suzuki agrees. In her analysis of Cavendish's plays, she affirms that Cavendish portrays marriage as allowing men "to subordinate and control women" (66).

6. See note 2

7. In his book, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, William G. Crane explains that the complex concept of wit was at times used "almost synonymous with 'mental acumen'" (9).

8. See Cunning, Bazeley, Foyster, Butler (12), or Spelman for information about men's ties to the mind.

9. Foyster explains that honor was largely measured in terms of public recognition of one's virtue (34-39). See Watson for more information about honor in the early modern period.

10. Bonin claims that all the new rules for the women center on "the private, domestic sphere" (112). However, I view the women's ability to "go abroad" and go "to plays, masques, balls, churchings" and other social gatherings as departing from strictly the domestic realm (*Bell* 117).

11. The early modern world viewed strength as a trait women lacked, explains Foyster (29).

12. Specifically, Bonin argues that Cavendish's texts portray female utopian spaces as unable to survive in a world governed by patriarchal order (123; 127). This proves problematic as Cavendish continually stresses the importance of women's entry into and, perhaps even domination of, that same world. Bonin recognizes this tension and affirms that the impossibility of female entrance in the public realm reveals Cavendish's dystopian outlook (127).

Chapter 4

Beyond the Bounds of Paradise: Transcending Gender From the Inside

Set in seemingly impossible locales such as a female army's battlegrounds and entirely separate planets filled with friendly animal-like creatures, Cavendish's utopian worlds continually tread the thin line between the real and the imagined. Due to the added pressure on boundaries between fantasy and reality, her works might appear even more fitting within the generic context of utopian works since "utopia" itself contains inherent tension between both the "good place" and "no place" it represents (Vieira 4).[1]

However, Cavendish does not leave binaries intact so much as she dismantles them. Just as her philosophical thought and fictional works break down divisions between immateriality and materiality, she erases gender boundaries through her heavy use of gender blending in depictions of both male and female characters. Multiple instances of convincing transvestism and depictions of physically strong women next to weaker men serve as testaments to her systematic attack on the gender binary. Due to her deconstruction of the gender binary, her works also undermine, frame as artificial, and even transcend gender hierarchy all together. She additionally portrays the seemingly impossible as possible since she not only allows, but also necessitates female entry into and dominance of the public realm.[2] Then, she complicates this entry by only allowing transcendence of gendered limitations to take place in primarily women-only spaces. Even so, Cavendish allows the all-female worlds to exist in fantastical depictions of her utopian worlds. The emphasis on such fantasies and the imaginative power needed to

generate them marks a continuation of her effort to break down gendered hierarchy while writing women into the public realm.

While her depiction of women's minds links them to immateriality, Cavendish also emphasizes their materiality and frames both their minds and bodies as sources of power that significantly hinder gendered hierarchies. Lady Victoria uses her wit to outsmart her husband by convincing him to take her to battle with him, illustrating that women's mental faculties can match men's. Victoria leads her all-female army into battle, showing that women also can possess physical might. The Empress offering her philosophical opinions and waging a war to save her native land similarly displays great mental and physical force equal (if not superior) to males. Since seventeenth-century discourse framed both strength of the mind and body as unquestionably male, Cavendish's emphasis on females' possessing both qualities proves gendered divisions to be false (Foyster 29; 40).[3] In *Convent of Pleasure*, female characters demonstrate that women's material existence can be a source of power as the women fully enjoy their own bodies with various sensual pleasures without husbands ruling over them. Her female characters even transcend gender binaries and the attached hierarchy through the lesbian couplings seen in *Convent of Pleasure* as well as strongly suggested within *The Blazing World*. While this lesbian transcendence gains most visibility in the relationship between Lady Happy and her prince(ss), it seems completely thwarted in their pairing when the prince's true biological sex is revealed as male. However, Cavendish continues making a feminist statement even when male characters appear, at first glance, to hinder female power.

Male characters help Cavendish break down the gender binary and its inherent hierarchy as they not only masquerade as women, but also appear only able to gain power through their connections to women. The prince in *Convent of Pleasure* can only marry Lady Happy and

return to his position as sovereign after manipulating the convent's women into believing he is a woman. Through the prince's need for women to in order to increase his own authority, Cavendish connects women to power while underscoring that men use females in order to take up positions of superiority. The prince's destruction of the convent, like the merchant's lust in *The Blazing World*, also allows Cavendish to invert the gendered implications of the Fall by placing guilt on men rather than Women. [4]

The Duke of Newcastle's entry into *The Blazing World* similarly depicts men as only able to obtain power after forging a connection to women. During their immaterial travel, the Duchess and the Empress "enter" the Duke's body. Describing the scene further, Cavendish writes:

> then the Duke had three souls in one body; and had there been but such souls more, the Duke would have been like the Grand Signior in his seraglio, only it would have been a platonic seraglio. But the Duke's soul being wise, honest, witty, complaisant and noble, afforded such delight and pleasure to the Empress's soul by her conversation, that these two souls became enamoured of each other; which the Duchess's soul perceiving, grew jealous at first, but then considering that no adultery could be committed amongst Platonic lovers, and that Platonism was divine, as being derived from divine Plato, cast forth of her mind that Idea of jealousy . . . the Duke's soul entertained the Empress's soul with scenes, songs, music, witty discourses, pleasant recreations, and all kinds of harmless sports.
>
> (81)

In light of Cavendish's rejection of Platonic lovers, the immaterial scene protects the women from any real male-female pairings that would bring "adultery" or a gendered hierarchy through a distinctly heterosexual coupling (*Seeds* 148).[5] Additionally, the improbable scene pokes fun at

the idea of immateriality by calling attention to the ridiculousness of any immaterial meeting of souls. Through mocking immateriality, Cavendish frees her text of the concept's gendered implications that privileged men.[6] Her choice to parody theories such as immateriality also suggests a rejection, on the level of the mind, of ideas that frame women as inferior to men. Given that her texts include relatively few male characters, it does seem significant that, of these males, only the Duke's description includes a long list of compliments. Since he appears so thoroughly feminized, one suspects that men only men closely linked the feminine can enjoy such praise within her work. The fact that he only appears in the tale while his body practically functions as a woman's (one that can be entered) additionally suggests that only females or female-like entities can truly possess power in her texts.

Like the men, women in Cavendish's tales also gain power through gender transgression as they continually enter the public realm. While Lady Happy's mind remains focused on the domestic realm with her thoughts of decorating the "Chambers" in her convent, women whose minds and actions center on the public realm enjoy meaningful increases in their authority (*Convent* 225). The Empress in *The Blazing World* dominates all aspects of her kingdom by running traditionally masculine positions as she heads the church, governs the land, and leads victorious military battles in the texts' depiction of the real world.

However, female involvement with the outside world changes significantly when the Duchess voices a desire to govern her own material world. The Empress's advisors explain the glory of the imaginary worlds to the Duchess:

> the Empress here, which although she possesses a whole world, yet enjoys she but
> a part thereof; neither is she so much acquainted with it, that she knows all the
> places, countries and dominions she governs . . .why should you desire to be

Empress of a material world, and be troubled with the cares that attend your government? whenas by creating a world within yourself, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts without control or opposition, and may make what world you please, and alter it when you please, and enjoy as much pleasure and delight as a world can afford you? (72-73)

Though Cavendish chooses to keep the Blazing World intact and to offer the most female interaction with the public world within that planet, this emphasis on the imagination seemingly signals women's ultimate retreat from materiality into the most private sphere available—that of the mind. This glorification of control over the imagination rather than power in the material, at first, appears to significantly hinder a feminist reading. However, Cavendish too uses the imagination to further her feminist aims.

Naturally, scholars have viewed this apparent retreat into the mind as moving women far from the public sphere that Cavendish's texts urge women to join. Mascetti frames this separation from the real world as partly celebrating women's imaginations. She also sees it as a force that limits female agency by keeping "woman to a realm of detached, useless, irregular, and fanciful thoughts" that she argues fits with seventeenth-century scientific and philosophical discourse rather than offering a challenge to such thoughts in a call for female empowerment (19). Cavendish's move to the internal world represents, for Catherine Gallagher, an attempt to gain greater female agency in a time when a woman could not become a "full *subject* of the monarch" (27, original emphasis). Rather than specifically detracting from a feminist perspective, Gallagher affirms that the multiple worlds that the Empress and Duchess go on to create frame "subjectivity as an infinite, unfathomable regression of interiority" (32). While Cavendish does stress the importance of the internal world, she then uses that interior realm of

the imagination as a means of enabling women to enter the public sphere.

By opening their minds to female power, the women in *The Blazing World* transcend the boundaries of the private sphere. Both Duchess and Empress then create their own worlds. The Empress attempts to make worlds that follow individual philosopher's such as "Descartes' opinion," but such worlds repeatedly prove faulty and the Empress must dispose of them. Only when the Empress "makes an imaginary world of her own" do all the subjects she creates "liv[e] in a peaceful society" (76). Cavendish emphasizes her rejection of male thought by showing that the male philosophers' opinions cannot lead to order. The Empress's ability to build a perfect world when using her own mind and disregarding male philosophers' views further stress both women's imaginative power and the need for women to purge their minds of male constructions. Descartes's teachings, of course, emphasize a division between mind and body (Cunning; Hatfield). As previously mentioned, this binary shares a connection to the immaterial/material division as it too links women to the inferior, corporeal body while allowing men to associate with the superior, immaterial mind. Therefore, Cavendish's decision to stress the importance of rejecting such thought inherently contains a refutation of one aspect of gender hierarchy that framed women as inferior. It also frames this rejection as something that must occur on the level of women's minds. While Lady Happy appears to internalize her position in the private realm with her musings on "home" and "Chambers," women whose minds break free from such boundaries can truly enjoy power as the Empress and the real and imaginary worlds she governs demonstrate (*Convent* 225).

The imagination further allows women to enter the public realm through the arts. In *Bell in Campo*, the king's first few laws for the women focus on providing them with greater power within the home. Then other laws provide them with greater freedom within the public world.

Next to the law enabling women to travel without their husbands' permission, the king declares that women may "go to plays, masques, balls, churchings, christenings, preaching's, whensoever they will, and as fine and bravely attired as they will" (117). Although this does celebrate the "fanciful" realm that Mascetti calls attention to, it also uses the arts as a means for women to exercise greater freedom as they can enter public spaces freely without a husband controlling their level of engagement with that outside world (19). Cavendish also places an importance on the arts in *The Blazing World*. Her fictional representation, the Duchess, even tells the Empress to write a work of fiction by "mak[ing] a poetical or romantical Cabbala, wherein you can use metaphors, allegories, similitude's, etc." (69). The suggestion comes as an alternative to undertaking the task of writing "the Jew's Cabbala," which the text frames as a meaningless (68). In framing art as the activity worth one's, art gains a certain amount of weight. Furthermore, the text also urges a female to produce art. Just as Cavendish's own publication marked a transgression of gender boundaries, her fictional stand-in suggests that another woman carry out such action.

Use of the imagination and the arts as ways of creating opportunities for female empowerment stretches beyond the confines of Cavendish's narratives and into her own personal words to her readers. Though not specifically addressed to women, her epilogue to *The Blazing World* tells readers that "they may create worlds of their own" and presumably follow her example by entering the public realm with their own fictional works (109). Cavendish further describes this move from the private to the public as one that crosses traditional gender boundaries since her preface to the same work discusses writing itself in masculine terms as she affirms, "*fictions* are an issue of man's fancy, framed in his own mind, according as he pleases" (5, original emphasis). As masculine "issue[s]," women's use of fiction inherently involves

struggling against gendered expectations. In the preface to her *Poems and Fancies* (1653), she

explicitly asks women to use the arts as a means of entering the public world. She urges females

to not only enter the public world through the art of "Poetry," but also "in the Amazonian

Government, or in the Politick Common-wealth, or in flourishing Monarchy, or in Schooles of

Divinity, or in Lectures of Philosophy," and any other arts "that may bring honour to our Sex"

(Cavendish qtd. in Leslie 97).[7] In addition to honor, Cavendish frequently mentions women's

ability to gain fame through the arts. Leslie notes that this search for fame rebelled against

traditional expectations for females as such glory was considered reserved for men (96).

Historically, Cavendish remained nothing if not committed to establishing this fame for herself.

She ceaselessly promoted her works, offering copies to the Library of the University of Leyden,

Oxford and Cambridge universities, and to influential philosophers such Hobbes (James xix).[8] In

fact, her preface to *The Blazing World* reads:

> I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is, or can be;
>
> which makes, that though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second, yet
>
> I endeavour to be *Margaret the First*; and although I have neither power, time nor
>
> occasion to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Caesar* did; yet rather than not to
>
> be mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made
>
> a world of my own; for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every
>
> one's power to do the like. (6, original emphasis)

For her, the arts offer the opportunity to fashion oneself into a figure with the power of a

monarch. In conjuring up this royal image, Cavendish calls attention to an extremely successful

female ruler by *not* mentioning Queen Elizabeth—the very name that the addition of "the first"

makes readers think of when placed next to a female name. Just as a monarch's position

represented a form of gender transgression for a female, Cavendish's desire for fame and entry into the public realm provided an exceedingly visible blurring of gender boundaries (Leslie 96).

The very gender blending found in Cavendish's texts also underpins her overall project as an author. Continually, her tales offer spaces of gender transgression that enable women to transcend seventeenth-century societal limitations to their sex's power. Whether breaking down distinctions between the material and immaterial, rethinking the gendered implications of the Fall, or exploring power relations in both public and private spheres, her deconstruction of gender binaries allows her to write women into positions of authority within the public world. Even when her female-run utopias appear threatened by male forces or overtly concerned with the workings of the mind, she continues pushing for women to gain influence outside of the domestic world. In grappling with her own feminist vision and the social limitations on her sex, her work documents an important step in women's literature. Her writings showcase one woman's effort to create space for her kind in literature and in society at large. Perhaps more accurately, her texts demonstrate a woman making a place for females in the public world *through* literature. While her emphasis on the imagination and the fanciful world of the arts does not strictly develop the blatant political rejection of patriarchal order that some require to label a piece "feminist," it does not make her work any less significant. In fact, the imagination is precisely the mechanism by which her feminist statement could be disseminated across time and space. After all, her ideas reach us today as public, materialized products of the mind—published fictional writings.

Chapter 4 Notes:

1. The word *utopia*, as Vieira notes, plays with the Greek *ouk* (not) and *topos* (place). Then, the word denotes a nonexistent place. Thomas More's *Utopia*, where the term was coined originally, describes the island of utopia as absolutely immaculate. Such an idyllic portrayal invites readers to confuse the word with its homophone, "Eutopia (the good place)" (Vieira 4). Therefore, the term "utopia" itself contains a tension as it presents us with an idyllic no place that More's text (as well as many other works following his) presents as existing someplace.

2. Bonin believes the tension between female agency in Cavendish's works and her depictions of reality show that "culturally dominant modes of thought are dystopian for women" (116). She also argues that Cavendish's works take a dystopian stance.

3. See also Bazeley, Butler (12), Cunning, or Spelman for information about historical gendered conceptions about physical strength and mental abilities.

4. See Miller for a critical analysis of Cavendish's use of the Garden narrative that differs from the one provided in chapter two of this study.

5. See Goldberg for more information about Cavendish's rejection of Platonic love.

6. See note 3

7. Leslie too points out the gendered transgressive nature of Cavendish's choice to publish. She also agrees that Cavendish's prefatory material (including the excerpt from *Poems and Fancies*) encourages women to enter the public realm (97-98).

8. Editor Susan James provides information about Cavendish's desire for fame in her introduction to Cavendish's *The Blazing World*. Leslie also discusses Cavendish's desire for fame at length. Cavendish's character "the Duchess" from *The Blazing World* reveals a desire for fame that reflects what Cavendish states the in tale's prefaces (*Blazing* 70-71; 6).

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